

HOBBS AMONG ANCIENT AND MODERN SCEPTICS: PHENOMENA AND BODIES

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1. THE PROBLEM OF HOBBS' PHENOMENALISM: "APPARITIONS UNTO US" AND "WORLD WITHOUT US"

The relationship between Hobbes and scepticism was, right from the beginning, the subject of controversy: while the philosopher was still alive, Mersenne felt obliged to warn Sorbière against the illusion of finding "his" *epoché* and "Scepticae naeniae" in *De cive*, whereas from that book he could have learned "dogmaticam firmissimis innixam fulcris".¹ The discussion

¹ The editions of Hobbes' works referred to are as follows: Hobbes, Thomas, *The Elements of Law Natural and Politic*, edited with a Preface and Critical Notes by Ferdinand Tönnies. Second Edition with a New Introduction by M.M. Goldsmith. London: 1969 (first ed. 1889) [abbreviated: *El.*]; Hobbes, Thomas, *De motu, loco et tempore*, in *Critique du "De mundo" de Thomas White, critical edition of an unpublished text*, ed. by Jean Jacquot and Harold Whitmore Jones. Paris: Vrin, 1973 [abbreviated: *De motu*]; Hobbes, Th., *Tractatus Opticus* (Harley Ms. 6796, ff. 193-266), first complete edition by Franco Alessio, *Rivista critica di storia della filosofia*, vol. 18, 1963, 147-228 [indicated as *Tractatus Opticus II*]; Hobbes, Thomas, *De cive: The Latin Version... A critical Edition by Howard Warrender*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983 [indicated as *De cive*]; Hobbes, Thomas, *De Corpore. Elementorum Philosophiae Sectio Prima*, critical edition, notes, appendices and index by Karl Schuhmann. Paris: Vrin, 1999. Hobbes, Thomas, *Leviathan*, edited with an introduction by C.B. Macpherson. London: Penguin Books, 1985 (indicated as *Lev.* – the dual pagination refers first to the 1651 edition and then to the modern edition indicated).

surrounding a possible influence of sceptical themes on Hobbes' philosophy must naturally begin from his considerations of the fallacies of the senses, developed in the first few chapters of *Elements*. This problem is all the more important in Hobbes' system since, without being an empiricist in the true sense, Hobbes took as his own two presuppositions, destined to emphasize the place of sensation in the construction of the system: on one hand he attributed to sense the role of the initial and indispensable stage of knowledge;² on the other hand he believed that all subsequent phases of psychological life, from imagination to memory, from mental discourse to "conception" as such, derived from the prolongation or from the transformation of perceptions.³

"Conception" is defined by a rigorous equivalence with sensible representation, it too being an "image" as is clarified in *Elements* in the passage in which, introducing an early formulation of the annihilatory hypothesis, all knowledge is reduced to representations of an imaginative character. The classical passage is Chapter II, in which Hobbes, putting "sense" and "conceptions" on the same plane, relates knowledge to "images or conceptions of the things without us",⁴ likewise formulating a definition of the products of "power... cognitive, or imaginative or conceptive"⁵ that insists on his "imaginative" character. "Sense" and "conceptions" have in common the fact that through "images" they "represent" "qualities of things", and not the things in themselves, which are in a relationship of

For all other works, reference is to the two classical collections: *Thomae Hobbes Malmesburiensis Opera Philosophica quae latine scripsit omnia in unum corpus nunc primum collecta studio et labore Gulielmi Molesworth*, 5 volumes, London, 1839, second reprint Aalen 1966 [edition indicated as: OL, followed by the Roman numeral to designate the volume]; *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury: now first collected and edited by Sir William Molesworth*, 11 volumes, London, 1839, second reprint Aalen 1966 [edition indicated as: EW, followed by the Roman numeral to designate the volume]. For the passage quoted in the text: *De cive*, p. 86: "Quantâ autem voluptate à nobis afficeris, quando videris nobilem illam Philosophiam, non minus quàm Euclidis Elementa demonstrari? Quàm libenter illi tuæ Epochæ, & Scepticis næniis renuntiaturus es, cùm dogmaticam firmissimis innixam fulcris fateri cogeris".

² See El. I, ii, 2, p. 3: "Originally all conceptions proceed from the actions of the thing itself, whereof it is the conception. Now when the action is present, the conception it produceth is called SENSE, and the thing by whose action the same is produced is called the OBJECT of sense".

³ See El. I, i-v, pp. 1-17. For a representation of Hobbes' psychology that stresses the analogies (as well as the differences) compared to an equally empiristic and mechanistic frame, such as that of Gassendi, I refer the reader to my previous work: Paganini, G., "Hobbes, Gassendi e la psicologia del meccanicismo", in: *Proceedings of the Conference "Hobbes oggi"*. Milano: Franco Angeli Editore, 1990, pp. 351-445.

⁴ El. I, i, 8, p. 2.

⁵ El. I, i, 7, p. 2.

radical exteriority with regard to the subject that knows them: “qualities of things without us”.⁶

At this point, considerations of “the main deception of sense” come into play, considerations that, owing to the principal and paradigmatic nature of sensible representations, risk reflecting a negative light on “cognitive power” as a whole. The basic points developed in Chapter II of *Elements* are, in brief, the following: 1) Hobbes establishes a very close connection between the characteristics of the sense organs, the diversity of “concepts” and the “diverse qualities of objects”, continually stressing the fact that not the latter in themselves, rather the “qualities” are the true contents of sensible representation: “By our several organs we have several conceptions of several qualities in the objects”.⁷ 2) It is a capital error to induce people to mistake the “image” (e.g. the “image in vision”) with “the very qualities themselves”, although, due to inveterate habit, the correct opinion appears to most people like “a great paradox”.⁸ 3) In the negative sense, Hobbes is able to rule out two beliefs typical of common sense and of its ingenuous realism, denying that the subject to which sensible qualities are inherent is “the object or the thing” (in this case the “thing seen”) and stating that the sensorial “image” is “nothing without us really”.⁹ He concludes with an assertion: 4) the “conceptions” of all the senses are inherent not to the object, but to the sentient (“their inherence is not the object, but the sentient”).¹⁰

In support of these arguments, advanced in the form of theses, Hobbes brings a whole series of experiences, normal and pathological, that had become commonplace: reflections of objects visible in the water, cases of double vision, whether deriving from illness or not, the phenomenon of echoes, lesions to the eye or to the optic nerve, etc. These cases are reposed with the one aim of persuading the reader to disassociate the sensible image from the object and instead to embrace the opposing thesis: perception is inherent not to the object but to the sentient.¹¹

⁶ El. I, i, 8, p. 2: “This imagery and representations of the qualities of things without us is that we call our cognition, imagination, ideas, notice, conception, or knowledge of them”.

⁷ El. I, ii, 3, p. 3. Examples of the sight and hearing follow: “And so the rest of the senses also are conceptions of several qualities, or natures of their objects”.

⁸ El. I, ii, 4, p. 3. An even worse paradox (“worse than any paradox”), indeed “a plain impossibility” is that resulting from imagining, as in scholastic theory and in part as still occurred in *Short Tract*, the existence of “species visible and intelligible” that come and go from the object (*ibid.*, p. 3-4).

⁹ El. I, ii, 4, p. 4: “That the subject wherein colour and image are inherent, is not the object or thing seen”. “That that is nothing without us really which we call an image or colour”.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

¹¹ This thesis is repeated continually. See for example El. I, ii, 9, p. 7: “That as in conception by vision, so also in the conceptions that arise from other senses, the subject of their inherence is not the object, but the sentient”. Compare this with the clause in El. I, ii, 4, p.

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